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For defectors, fuel stopover is freedom

By Janet Cawley
Chicago Tribune

GANDER, Canada—The rumped, dour-faced passengers file off the Aeroflot flight, walk stiffly past the blue plastic furniture in the transit lounge, skirt the bird sculpture and head for a concession stand, where they are served free soft drinks. A few amble toward the duty-free shop or the washrooms.

If this is a normal day, all will retrace their steps about an hour later and climb back aboard their refueled jet to continue their flight from Moscow to Havana. But on nearly 100 occasions last year and 12 so far this year, the simple refueling stopover has turned into an escape to freedom for those who consider themselves political refugees.

This nondescript transit lounge in this isolated outpost has become one of the major points of defection for those seeking political asylum from communist countries and lately from Iran and Sri Lanka.

What makes Gander so suited for this purpose is its location as the first North American airport, and therefore refueling stop, along the Great Circle Route from Europe to North and South America. From 1945 until the advent of the long-distance jets in the 1960s, almost all trans-Atlantic jets stopped to refuel here. But now it services primarily just those from communist countries, which choose to save money by sending their planes across the Atlantic with only partly filled tanks.

So roughly 20 times a week, Aeroflot planes from the Soviet Union, Interflug flights from East Germany and Cubana planes from Cuba—along with occasional aircraft from Poland and Czechoslovakia—put down at Gander and disgorge passengers into the transit lounge for a 60-minute stopover.

It's in this lounge, dominated by a huge mural depicting the history of flight and a clock that shows the time in Moscow as well as Gander, that most of the would-be defectors make their break.

"Usually they approach a uniformed person, an RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] officer or the person attending the information desk. That's normal," said Jerrett Letto, who is in charge of the Canadian Immigration office at the airport. "Sometimes they try to hide in a washroom or the duty-free shop."

"Usually they have learned a little phrase [in English] to tell the officer, like, 'I want to stay.' Sometimes, if they speak no English, they have notes."

But defecting isn't always easy, particularly if friends or other passengers on the plane have other ideas.

"I remember one Cuban doctor, a woman, who ran up to an RCMP officer" in the transit lounge, Letto said. "The other passengers ran after her and tried to drag her away. The RCMP officer had one arm and was pulling, and these other people had her other arm and were pulling. She was literally being torn between the two. Finally, the officer let go when he was afraid she'd be hurt."

"Then I had an interview with her, but her tour guide was present. The doctor said she'd changed her mind and she was going back home, but I could tell from the deadpan expression on her face that she didn't mean what she said."

Letto then consulted with Foreign Ministry officials in Ottawa, who said he had a right to talk with her privately. The woman was removed from the plane, which had been blocked from taking off, and was re-interviewed. This—

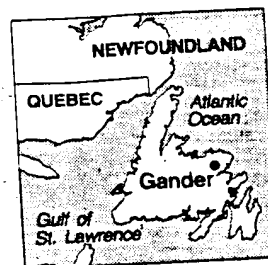
time she stayed.

Other cases have involved would-be defectors running across the tarmac to hide in a nearby woods, one couple who reportedly leapt into the back seat of an RCMP cruiser parked on the tarmac, and those who go into a washroom and refuse to come out.

But despite the James Bond overtones and hints of intrigue, the defections have become a pretty ordinary fact of life to airport officials such as Letto. "Actually," he said, "it's pretty routine except when something spectacular happens."

Many of those from Sri Lanka and Iran travel laborious and expensive routes to get to Gander, often involving hopscotching through countries until they can buy a ticket, often on the black market, for Cuba.

For those from communist countries, permanent-residence status is granted almost automatically. For those from places such as Iran or Sri Lanka, it's tougher, and defectors from these countries usually wind up staying at the Airport Inn, a ramshackle motel a five-minute taxicab ride from the airport, until their cases are processed. There, they work on studying English and make plans for the future.



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"I want to study in industry, economy or medicine," said a 24-year-old Iranian who, like most refugees, asked that his name not be used. He and a 23-year-old Iranian friend defected four weeks ago and arrived in Gander with \$6 between them.

To get to Canada, they said, they had gone from Iran to East Germany to Denmark to Moscow to Cuba to Gander.

"I couldn't stay in Iran," said the 24-year-old, who described himself as a singer and a student. "They were searching for me. If I hadn't left, I would be dead. Things like snow here make no difference for me, because I want to be alive.

"I am very grateful to Canada," he said, sucking in air between his teeth to emphasize his point. "I will be grateful to Canada my whole life."